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Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles*. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Literature and Culture. Malden, MA; Oxford: Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Pp. xix, 598. ISBN 9781405187268. \$199.95.

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Preview

We are currently in the midst of a Sophoclean revolution. The past few years alone have witnessed a veritable explosion of several key books on the tragedian whom ancient comic poets considered ‘easy-going’ (εὐκόλος: Ar. *Ra.* 82) and ‘happy’ (εὐδαίμων: Phryn. Com., fr. 32 Kassel–Austin [31 Kock]): these include Simon Goldhill and Edith Hall’s Festschrift in honor of Pat Easterling, *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition*, Goldhill’s *Sophocles and the Language of Greek Tragedy*, and Sarah Nooter’s *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy*. To that list of important books we may now add Kirk Ormand’s edited volume, which attempts ‘to bring out the Sophocles of fifth-century Athens, to see both the poet and his works in their specific historical context’ (4). The Companion indeed achieves this aim, containing an impressive collection of thirty-eight essays by leading scholars that not only cover all aspects of the dramatist’s life, including his relationship to fifth-century Athenian political, religious and intellectual thought, but also thoroughly analyze his works and their diverse afterlife. Each chapter furthermore ends with a handy and up-to-date ‘Guide to Further Reading.’ The remarkable breadth and range covered in this Companion will make it an indispensable reference for any student of Sophocles.

Ormand’s introduction points out a major inconsistency in modern scholarship on Sophocles, which has continually presented the tragedian as a figure isolated in time and space, as either a humanist or as a student of the human psyche, ‘producing poetry of artistic greatness almost in a vacuum, entirely divorced from the political and intellectual currents of his time’ (2). Such readings, Ormand explains, propelled his interest in putting together a volume whose aim is ‘to bring out the Sophocles of fifth-century Athens.’ In order to arrive at a more historically grounded picture of both author and text, Part I (‘Text and Author’) contains two essays treating some of the unreliable evidence provided by the ancient biographical tradition which, paradoxically, has guided some of these ahistorical readings. Ruth Scodel covers the stories about Sophocles’ life, paying

special attention to his involvement with the Athenian hegemony, and John Davidson discusses the traditional account given by the ancients that stresses Sophocles' 'middle position' in relationship to his rivals Aeschylus and Euripides. In addition, P. J. Finglass provides a valuable overview of the textual transmission of the Sophoclean corpus and a helpful outline of modern critical work on the text of the plays, from Richard Bentley's conjectures to the edition of Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson.

Part II ('The Plays and the Fragments') is one of the longest sections in the Companion, containing articles on each of the surviving plays and on the fragments of lost dramas. Most of these essays cover issues directly relating to the interpretation and performance of the play in question (such as themes, dramatic techniques, and modern perspectives), which should be especially valuable to students. Experts will also find useful material in this section, as some chapters tackle less obvious aspects of both the plays and their author. Peter Burian, for example, expertly guides us through the 'polyphony' of the *Ajax*, that is, the variety of perspectives that the play provides beyond those of the eponymous hero; Thomas Van Nortwick considers the manner in which Sophocles revisits and radically re-imagines his most famous hero at the end of his career in order to offer a summation of his tragic oeuvre and its characteristic features; and Willeon Slenders expands our understanding of Sophocles' dramatic art by examining the fragments of his satyr plays.

The four chapters on 'Sophoclean Techniques' in Part III offer a more in-depth exploration of some of the features typically linked with Sophoclean theatre. In 'Sophocles *Didaskalos*' C. W. Marshall discusses the tragedian's innovative stagecraft, in particular his skilled use of role doubling, masks and costumes, extras and silences, chorus and music, and space and scenery. In Marshall's view 'the performance dynamic as exhibited in the structure of the plays demonstrates that Sophocles wrote with a directorial eye' (188). Sarah Nooter explores the lyricism of Sophoclean heroes and studies their authority, language, and music as 'poetic speakers,' paying special attention to the lyrical features in the sufferings of Heracles, Electra, Ajax, and Philoctetes. Sheila Murnaghan gives a lucid overview of the choral role in Sophoclean theatre, starting with Aristotle's praises for the manner in which they share in the action (συναγωνίζεσθαι: Arist. *Po.* 18, 1456a25-29), before moving on to consider their other two main functions as both internal audience and as singers and dancers. Finally, in 'Lament as Speech Act in Sophocles' Casey Dué examines the speech act most commonly associated with women on the tragic stage, and discusses the mournful utterances of Tecmessa, Antigone, and Electra.

Part IV ('Sophocles and Fifth-Century Political, Religious, and Intellectual Thought') contains some of the most wide-ranging and varied readings of Sophocles and his theatre. Given the diversity and breadth of perspectives presented, it is perhaps the most valuable contribution made by this Companion. Peter W. Rose considers class and class ideology in Sophocles' plays, specifically in the *Ajax* and *Antigone*, in order to argue that Sophocles displays 'a profound ideological commitment — and a consequent agenda — to the idea that, however justified many elements in the critique of *eugeneia* by his rival tragedians are, his society should recognize precisely the natural superiority of these elements to all

alternatives' (267). In 'Sophocles and Contemporary Politics' Robin Osborne explores Sophocles' relationship to fifth-century Athenian politics, examining his involvement in Athenian political life as well as the question of whether any of the extant plays engaged closely with contemporary political debates. He concludes that the tragedies do not contain any direct or indirect references to the democracy with which they were contemporaneous, but rather 'what we see in the plays is how personal issues play out against a political background, and how moral and religious attitudes cannot be divorced from questions of political power and authority' (284). The subsequent chapters consider the importance of various key topics for the understanding of Sophocles' plays: Athenian law (Edward M. Harris), Early Medicine and Greek Medical Thought (Robin Mitchell-Boyask), Heroization and Hero Cult (Bruno Currie). It is also worth noting that this section of the Companion not only explores Sophocles' varying interactions with aspects of political, medical, and religious realities but also continues to engage with more abstract questions. In her essay, 'The Necessity and Limits of Deliberation in Sophocles' Theban Plays,' Edith Hall examines acts of deliberation and decision-making processes in *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, arguing that a study of 'this interaction between human decision-taking and theological imperative can illuminate Sophoclean tragedy's "bottom line" on the question of whether there is any causal relationship between human happiness and human intellectual agency' (302).

Though the chapters in Part V ('Gender and Sexuality') continue lines of inquiry similar to those pursued in Part IV, their explorations of the complexities of gender and sexuality as they relate to Sophoclean theatre warrant a separate section. Nancy Worman examines the various 'recalcitrant bodies' of both male and female characters (bodies which are all ultimately male in form, given that they all belong to male actors) that populate the Sophoclean stage. Focusing on two male-female pairs, *Electra* and *Philoctetes* as well as *Ajax* and *Antigone*, she argues that 'the particular inflections of character that shape Sophocles' heroes do not owe to gender as much as they owe to other distinctions, namely those that barely edge on the human' (363). Citing studies that chart the changing role of mothers in the fifth-century *polis*, who must produce legitimate children, Laura McClure examines tragic mothers and Athenian views of motherhood. Though her focus is on the presentation of mothers in *Electra* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, her examination also considers Aeschylus's *Clytemnestra*, from whom much of the tragic language and many of the images of maternity are derived. The final two essays tackle the portrayal of marriage (Cynthia Patterson) and masculinity (Bruce M. King) on the Sophoclean stage.

Parts VI ('Historical Interpretations') and VII ('Influence and Imitation') explore Sophocles' diverse and varied afterlife from the fourth-century musings of Aristotle to twentieth century African-American adaptations, with important stops in nineteenth century Europe and, of course, twentieth century psychoanalysis. This part of the volume opens with two chapters that examine the interpretation of Sophocles in the ancient world: an essay analyzing Aristotle's influential readings of Sophocles and his theatre (John T. Kirby) and a fine piece on the complex and close engagement of Sophocles with Homeric poetry (Seth L. Schein). The subsequent essays cover the intellectual history of Sophocles in the modern world, beginning with his interpretation in Europe from the Renaissance

to Nietzsche (Michael Lurie), continuing with a consideration of ancient Greek literature, particularly the *Antigone*, in late Victorian and early modernist England ('Virginia Woolf, Richard Jebb, and Sophocles' *Antigone*' by Denise Eileen McCoskey and Mary Jean Corbett), and ending with psychoanalysis's continual fixation on Sophoclean theatre ('Freud and the Drama of Oedipal Truth' by Richard H. Armstrong, and 'Sophocles with Lacan' by Mark Buchan). The final section deals with the reception of Sophocles' plays in diverse locations and historical times: the *Oedipus* in Rome as mediated by Seneca (Alex Dressler), the *Antigone* both in German-occupied Paris thanks to Jean Anouilh's innovative adaptation (Jed Deppman) and in nineteenth century Greece at the forging of modern Greek national identity (Gonda Van Steen), and finally, both *Oedipus* plays in contemporary African-American theatre (Emily Wilson). Though a final section on 'reception' has now become a requirement for all new companions to ancient authors, it is worth noting that accounts of these re-imaginings often reveal not only the continuing relevance of a given author in modern society, but also new aspects of the original that had otherwise been obscured. In this vein, Hallie Rebecca Marshall successfully demonstrates how Tony Harrison's *the Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, originally performed at Delphi in 1988 and with a second version at London's National Theatre in 1990, changed modern public perception of Sophocles by exposing audience members to the 'somewhat embarrassing tradition of satyr plays' (557). It is bold to connect the universally admired figure of Sophocles to an 'embarrassing tradition,' since, as Walter Kaufmann once pointed out, 'Sophocles, like Mozart, has no serious detractors' (1968, *Tragedy and Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ, p. 195).

This Companion promises to diversify further the reasons for this admiration by presenting Sophocles as a multi-faceted figure. Publicly engaged in the politics of fifth-century Athens, he wrote a variety of tragedies and satyr plays that were not only dramatically and poetically innovative but were also steeped in the many intellectual currents of his day, and these in turn have inspired countless dramatists and thinkers throughout history and around the world. In the conclusion to his introduction Ormand discusses his hopes for this Companion, namely, that he will consider it successful 'if it offers a compass and a directional guide for future work on Sophocles' (6). This future work might be conducted in areas that this Companion, for all its admirable breadth, does not treat thoroughly — a chapter on the metrical features and effects of his verse, for example, would have been valuable — but this volume will indeed serve as an indispensable reference point for the future study of Sophocles.

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